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ABSTRACT

East Asia is the region which has experienced unprecedented growth in the past few decades. This growth resulted in the increase in education opportunities and the empowerment of women. Modernization and globalization provided opportunities for many women in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan. Modern Asian women can obtain higher education and gain status in their careers; they are at the crossroads between tradition and modernity. This paper provides information about the women's movements in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. Readers obtain an understanding of globalization and its impact on women's lives in these societies. It concludes that the status of women has improved dramatically over the last 30 years; but there are still obstacles that prevent women from achieving equity in political participation, equal pay, and equal share of household responsibilities. Contains a 13-item bibliography. (Author/BT)

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Asian Women in Transitions: How Modernization Affects Their Lives

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Asian Women in Transitions: How Modernization Affects Their Lives

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Abstract

East Asia is the region which has experienced unprecedented growth in the past few decades. This growth has resulted in the increase in education opportunities and the empowerment of women. Modernization and globalization has opened up certain kinds of options for many women in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan. The modern Asia women have enjoyed the opportunities to obtain higher education and gain status in their careers; they are at the cross roads between tradition and modernity. This paper provides information of the women's movements in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Taiwan. The paper also helps readers to obtain an understanding of globalization and its impact on women's lives in those societies.

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Perspectives

Asian societies have traditionally been strongly male dominated. Critics concluded Confucianism laid the groundwork for the current social ethos, which confined women to the kitchen for the benefit and pleasure of their masters (Mill, 1970). The worldwide thrust of modernization and westernization in the late 19th century affected Asian women. They were exposed to world outside the home and were mobilized into social activities. Women's status has been advanced in a variety of areas.

Lee and Clark (2000) pointed out that the status of women in East Asia should be especially interesting for two reasons. First, the emancipation and empowerment of women have long presented a vexing challenge throughout the region. Second, East Asia has what appears to be a very distinctive set of relationships among its traditional cultures, patterns of industrialization, and progress in political development.

One of the most revolutionary changes of the 20th century was the rapid increase of women in leadership roles in many societies. East Asia is the region which has experienced unprecedented economic growth in the past few decades. This growth has resulted in the increase in education opportunities and the empowerment of women. Modernization and globalization have opened certain options for many women in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Taiwan. The modern Asia women enjoy opportunities to obtain higher education and gain status in their careers; they straddle between tradition and modernity (Edwards and Roces, 2000; Tamney and Chiang, 2002).

Moreover, the interactions between Asia and the rest of the world, and between class and gender, have caused conflict and change for women in these societies. Asian women's movement, to some extent, is parallel with Western women's movement. Important women's group in Asian societies have impacted on policy changes and influenced women's thoughts in these societies.

Modernization and industrialization also caused an awareness of individualization and self-fulfillment (Tamney & Chiang, 2002). In this paper, changes in Asian women's lives, women's political participation, education attainment, and love and marriage will be discussed.

Asian women's status

East Asia societies have a long history of Confucian impact. The traditional Confucian view of women causes conflicts in every part of women's lives. In Confucian's idea that women's lives should follow "Three Obediencies": obediency to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son in widowhood (The Book of Rites). Modernization challenged the traditional second class and submissive role expectation. Gender relations have shifted. Although Hong Kong women have made considerable progress in the legislative and political arenas, the attitudes and behaviors dominating their day-to-day lives bear witness to the resilience of patriarchal values within the modern society (Tang, & et al, 2000). Many Hong Kong women still assume roles as a wife, mother and workingwoman.

The lives of many Korean women have improved dramatically in many aspects, and yet gender inequality is still a distinguishing feature of modern South Korean society. Although Korean family structure has been altered in significant ways, the society still

holds strong Confucian values of family. Women still take full responsibilities for domestic matters even if they work outside their home. The industrialization has reinforced the sexual division of labor in Korean families (Hampson, 2000).

Singapore women continued to endure patriarchy. Men remain as heads-of-household, and state-endorsed policies are made with this view in mind. Singapore women are grappling with the changing social conditions that economic development brings. As their day-to-day life experiences expose the contradictions of being a traditional woman and feminist ideal womanhood, fighting against patriarchy is still an uphill battle (Chan, 2000).

Taiwan has gained notable economic and political influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Women's status has improved but the Confucian cultural norms still pose certain challenges to women. Women still perform traditional roles in the family and fulfill limiting gender specific social expectations with regards to behavior and employment (Chiang, 2000).

The home and domestic responsibilities have been the center of Japanese women's activities since the 1890s. However, being "good wives and wise mothers" was not, in fact, the traditional ideal for women. In the early twentieth century, when the patriarchal family became the foundation for the Meiji family –state ideology, the government began to disseminate the samurai ideal of "good wife, wise mother" to middle class women. Both the state and business have recognized the importance of Japanese housewives for the nation's economic growth (Tipton, 2000). Such expectation does not encourage women to be active in public life as well as career achievement.

Political Involvement

The gender composition of the government provides a good indicator of women's role and influence in the formal political system. There have been an increasing number of women standing for election at various government levels. Asian women participate in political involvement with different degrees of success.

In Hong Kong, at present women comprise 26.7 percent of the Executive Council, 16.7 percent of the Legislative Council, and 26 percent of the Municipal Council, as compared to 0 percent, 3.8 percent, and 11.5 percent in the respective Councils in 1971(Tang, Au, Chung, & Ngo, 2000). This is the highest women political involvement in the East Asia.

Singapore has been described as an authoritarian state. Chan (2000). Examined the status of women in Singapore and concluded that Singapore is also an overly patriarchal state. When necessary, women's rights may be subsumed for the 'greater good' of society. As a result, for a long time women's voices were not represented in Parliament. From 1970 to 1984, the Singapore Parliament did not have any women members. Currently there are only six women in Parliament.

Politics in the People of Republic of China (PRC) is entirely dominated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The highest ruling body in the party structure is that of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. A handful of women have become alternate members of the Politburo. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the years immediately following, the percentage of women in politics was at its highest since 1949. In 1969 10.5 percent of the Politburo were women compared with 4 percent in 1982 and 0 percent in 1977, 1987 and 1992. A similar pattern emerges with the percentage of

woman members in the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 197310.3 percent of the 195 members were women, 5.2 percent in 1982, and 6.4 percent in 1992. Those that have attained positions of authority usually have some connection with the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) indicating that within the CCP there is a certain expectation that women perform "women's political work" and do not venture into the broader political realm (Edwards, 2000).

Korea's democratization has created high hopes for women. However, since democratization, three preliminary elections have been held – in 1988, 1992, and 1996. In the first two elections, no women were elected to the national congress from the individual districts, only two women were elected in 1996 (Lee and Clark, 2000). Korean women have run for and won election to South Korea's legislature, the National Assembly, throughout the postwar era. However, their success has been limited. Their seats have not been much more than two to three percent level. According to Lee (2000), the reasons for the disappointing result are: democratization brought a return to male-dominated party politics; women's representation dropped from 2.9 percent to 1.0 percent between 1985 and 1992. In 1996 women's representation recovered to 3 percent.

Compared with South Korean women, women's representation in Taiwan is much more advanced. Throughout the postwar era, women have held approximately 10 percent or more of the seats in all of Taiwan's legislative bodies, and this percentage has grown gradually over time. According to Lee (2000), there are two reasons for this performance. First, Taiwan has multimember districts, voters can vote for only one candidate, using a single vote which allows candidates to win with a fairly small number of total votes, this have helped women and minority groups. In addition, the 1946

Constitution reserved about 10 percent of legislative seats for women. By the mid-1990s, women held about 20 percent of the seats in the National Assembly, Provincial Legislature, and Taipei City Council.

Japanese women remain under represented in national politics. Japan is the lowest among industrialized nations according to a 1991 survey (Kubo & Gelb, 1994, in Tipton, 2000). Despite the demands of the women's movement since 1970s, at average Japanese women have made up only 2 percent of the House of Representatives in the Diet. In 1992 women only constituted 2.34 percent in the House of Representatives (Tipton, 2000).

Education

The industrialization in the 1960s provides women in East Asia opportunities to obtain formal education. A marked expansion of basic education in Hong Kong during the 1970s demonstrates an increase in literacy. Free and compulsory education including six years of primary schooling instituted in 1971, and an additional three years of secondary education were added in 1978. Women were the prime beneficiaries of this policy.

Only half of the women in Hong Kong were literate in 1971, by 1996 this figure had increased to 86.6 percent. The female to male literacy ratio showed an increase from .71 in 1971 to .91 in 1996. Two point eight percent of women had completed tertiary education in 1971, but 13.3 in 1996. The ratio of female to male full-time higher education enrollment has increased from .61 in 1981 to .95 in 1996 (Tang & et al.2000).

In Singapore since the 1960s, Singapore women have gained tremendous opportunities in education. In 1980, 92.7 percent of women above the age of 60 had

received no or incomplete primary education. By 1990 the percentage had fallen to 77.7 percent. Those receiving secondary and upper secondary education have increased from 4.7 percent to 6.7 percent, and those attaining tertiary education increased from 0.2 percent to 0.4 percent.

For women aged 15 to 24, the literacy rate has improved from 84.5 percent in the 1970s to 96.2 percent in 1990. More women are entering universities than ever before. In 1990, only 4.4 percent of women aged 20 to 59 had tertiary education, compared to 9 percent in 1997 (Chan, 2000).

In China during the 1950s and 1960s the CCP embarked upon major campaigns to eradicate illiteracy. Women were a major focus of these early campaigns. Nevertheless, the problems of female illiteracy remained serious. There is evidence that girls face greater difficulties gaining access to schooling than boys. Over 71 percent of China's 164 million illiterates are women (SSB 1997, in Edwards, 2000) and 80 percent of the nearly 3 million unschooled primary-age children are girls (Rai, 1993, in Edwards, 2000). In 1997 25.54 percent of the female population over the age of fifteen was designated as illiterate or semi-literate.

The percentages of Chinese women and girls enrolled as students show a slight increase in the past three decades. In 1973 women made up of 30.8 percent of the students enrolled in higher education, in 1989 they comprised 33.7 percent, and 36.4 percent in 1997. The figures for secondary and primary schools show a marginal increase. In 1973 girls comprised 33 percent of secondary students while in 1989 they comprised 41.4 percent. At the primary schooling girls comprised 40.7 percent in 1973, 45.9 percent in 1989 and 50 percent in 1997 (SSB 1997, in Edwards, 2000).

Unlike women in other parts of Asia, education has not proved to be the doorway to greater employment or career opportunities for women in Korea. The Korean education system has expanded dramatically since the Korean War (1950-1953) and the educational level for both women and men has risen dramatically over the past three decades. In 1960 the average number of years of education was 4.78 for men and 2.92 for women; by 1998 it was 11.8 years for men and 9.37 years for women (ROK, 1998, in Hampson, 2000). Despite rapid raises in the participation of women in the tertiary sector during the 1990s women are still vastly under represented. In 1990, 24 percent of women of student age (18-21) were enrolled in tertiary education by 1997, this had risen to 50.9 percent. Over the same period, the percentage of women of student age enrolled has risen from 50 percent in 1990 to 85.7 percent in 1997. At tertiary level women concentrate in education and the humanities while men dominate the science and technology programs (ROK, 1998, in Edwards, 2000). However, such education is perceived as a mechanism for attracting a higher status husband. Women engaged in paid employment have lower status than housewives because they need money. They are perceived to belong to a lower class.

In Taiwan, the educational standards have risen considerably and the inequality between the levels of men's and women's education has decreased. In 1991 Taiwan recorded a literacy rate of 93.24 percent. The improvement in access to education for women over the generations is the result of several factors. Chiang (2000) concluded that recent economic growth, together with reduced family size, the introduction of free education up to junior high school, and changing attitudes on the part of both parents and women themselves, have contributed to the educational attainment of Taiwanese women.

In 1950, female students at the college and university levels composed 10.89 percent. In 1980 women composed of 42.2 percent at the undergraduate level and 20.4 percent at the graduate level. This has increased to 46 percent and 25.45 percent in 1990, and 48.08 percent and 28.9 percent in 1997. Female university students are overwhelmingly concentrated in the humanities and liberal arts and are enrolled in vocational schools and colleges or in teachers colleges. This leads to the conclusion that social factors still perpetuate different educational opportunities for women.

In Japan, the 1946 constitution made education for both girls and boys a basic right. In 1970, 82.7 percent of females continued from lower to upper secondary school (up from 55.9 % in 1960), and by the end of the decade this proportion reached 95%. In 1996 females made up only 22.9 % of four-year university students. The majority aim for the less rigorous junior colleges. The minority of females who do obtain 4-year university degrees tend to come from wealthy families where the parents themselves have strong educational backgrounds (Tipton, 2000).

Marriage and Romance

As Asian societies moved toward modern societies, women in this region are longing to marry for love. The marriages of Hong Kong women have undergone similar changes to those found in other developed countries. Over the last three decades, a greater proportion of women have delayed their marriage or parenthood, remained single or childless and greater numbers have sought divorce. In the 1996 Census, the crude marriage rate for women was 11.2 as compared to 19 per 1,000 populations in 1971. The average age of women in their first marriage has been delayed from 22.9 in 1971 to 26.9 in 1996. Their first birth postponed from 23.4 years in 1971 to 27.9 in 1991. The divorce

rate has risen from 0.3 in the early 1970s to 1.5 per 1,000 populations in recent years (Tang, & et al, 2000).

Marriage remains a major concern for the parents of the young women and men involved – it represents an opportunity to improve the status of the family and is far more than simply a manifestation of a young couple' mutual affection. Traditionally, Korean parents arranged marriages for their children. Today Korean marriages normally include the following three formats: fully arranged, as was traditionally the case; half arranged and half love; and fully a love match. In the 1990s most marriages fall into the second category.

Marriage is a strong expectation in Korea. An unmarried woman older than 30 is a cause for concern amongst her friends and relatives. As women obtain more education the average age of married has increased. According to Hampson (2000) Korean women's first marriage average age has increased from 21.6 years in 1960 to 25.3 years in 1991, for men was from 25.4 in 1960 to 28.4 in 1991.

On the mainland China, staying single is increasing. Moreover, arranged marriages by parents or other relatives have almost disappeared in the cities (Zhang, 1999, in Tamney & Chiang, 2002).

In Japan, motherhood means marriage. Women in their early twenties undergo intense pressure from family and friends as well as society to marry before they reach 25. Despite this, in the 1990s women's average age at first marriage rose to 26. Many young women delay their burdens of being wives and mothers. Tipton (2000) concluded high levels of education and longing for marriage for love might have contributed to this delay.

Conclusion

The old saying "When the hen clucks, the family will be ruined" means that women's involvement in social activities will result in the destruction of the whole family. A recent social change in women's place in society is often expressed as "progress toward modernity", however, not all change is "progress" and not all "modernity" enhances women's status (Roces & Edwards, 2000). Women in Asia served as agents of change who harnessed the power for their own ends.

Status of women in Asia has improved dramatically over the last thirty years. However, there are still many obstacles that prevent women from achieving equity in political participation, equal pay, and equal share of household responsibilities. The paternalistic attitudes in these societies and the "old boy" networks still hinder women in East Asia, especially in the "Confucian-based" societies in this geographical area. Although laws and policies encouraging gender equality can be introduced within a relatively short span of time, removal of the patriarchal culture will take much longer. The achievement of equality for women will require transformation of deeply rooted social structures and male-dominated institutions. Chan (2000) concluded that women in Asia still stand at a crossroads. Women in Asia should work with men in other social groups on mutually important issues to reach the real equity in their societies.

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